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ABSTRACT

One of the major decisions college men and women face involves sexual behavior. A large proportion of students often choose to engage in premarital sexual activity and although birth control is usually available, unplanned pregnancy is still a threat. Couples (N=295) participated in a study to examine decision-making by unmarried undergraduate couples as they resolved the simulated dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy. The similarity among choices for pregnancy resolution and ratings of considerations were the most striking finding. Among both male and female students, abortion was most commonly selected, followed by marriage, single parenthood, and adoption. Students viewed their interpersonal relationship as having the strongest impact on decision making. Among couples who initially disagreed, discussion with the partner seemed helpful in facilitating agreement. The findings suggest that simulated decision making may be a useful counseling technique. (Author/JAC)

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UNPLANNED PREGNANCY: A DILEMMA FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision making process of unmarried undergraduate couples as they resolved the simulated dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy. My goal was to identify which alternatives male and female students would choose if sexual activity resulted in pregnancy and to discover which considerations were important to them in making their decision. I wanted to explore the differences between the way men and women reasoned about this issue and to determine the degree to which discussion with partners affected their decision.

As a counseling psychologist in a university counseling service, I am particularly concerned with decisions that undergraduate men and women face. One of the major decisions involves sexual behavior; if students live away from home they are free to come and go as they please in an environment where premarital sex is prevalent and widely accepted. They can no longer rely on their parents to impose restrictions but must evolve their own code of appropriate sexual behavior. A large proportion of students do choose to engage in premarital intercourse (Dorman, 1978).

Although birth control is available on most college campuses, unplanned pregnancy is still a threat. Students question the safety of the pill and IUD and the diaphragm and other barrier methods are not 100% effective. There are also psychological reasons that affect students' contraceptive use (Dembo & Lundell, 1979). These researchers found that although students were engaging in intercourse, some did not accept the validity of their actions and so eschewed birth control; in this way they denied responsibility for their behavior. Many

students were concerned about the spontaneity of sex and said they did not want to appear overly prepared for sex by thinking about birth control.

As a result, the pregnancy rate among college students has risen steadily in the past ten years (Dorman, 1978; Siddal, 1973; Vincent & Stelling, 1973). With abortion as a legal alternative, the woman has three options: bear the child and raise it herself; put the child up for adoption; or terminate the pregnancy. The pregnant woman may or may not take into consideration the opinions of her sexual partner as she is making the decision.

Although resolving an unplanned pregnancy is usually stressful, a pregnant college student faces an especially difficult task. Even though the couple is engaging in intercourse, the relationship may be a casual one and not stable enough for marriage. The partners, depending on the depth of their relationship, may never have talked about unplanned pregnancy and the choice may arouse a moral conflict between them. Each individual is faced with a momentous decision at a time when their values are in flux; similarly a "young" relationship is challenged by a very adult dilemma. Therefore in examining decision making about unplanned pregnancy, it is important to take into account individual needs as well as the dynamic of the relationship itself. One objective of this study was to determine how individual needs were related to students' decision making about pregnancy: what was important to students in making their decision and which needs predominate.

A related question was the issue of male - female differences in needs and values. Although some researchers have examined women's decision making, the male role in pregnancy resolution has been ignored. There has been no research comparing men and women's decision making about unplanned pregnancy. This may be because male partners rarely appear at the family planning clinics where this research has been done. Because of the difficulty in enlisting the participation of male partners, I chose to interview couples about the hypothetical dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy.

Although hypothetical decision making may not match reasoning about an actual pregnancy, I was concerned with how men and women conceptualized the issue and not how they reacted in a crisis. Hypothetical reasoning and actual decision making have been positively correlated in other research (Haan, 1974) and the use of simulation tasks, such as the Prisoner's Dilemma, is common in social psychology research. The information from simulated decision making about unplanned pregnancy is potentially useful to the couples who were involved in the study, can contribute to knowledge of college student development, and can provide clues to counselors of college students about how men and women might manage the dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy.

METHOD

I began with a pilot study, interviewing 10 unmarried, undergraduate couples. I talked to the men and women separately and as couples, about how they would respond to an unplanned pregnancy. From the data, I derived a list of 8 considerations that were important to the students in making their decision.

The eight considerations were: 1) What My Partner Wants to do, 2) Financial Considerations, 3) Parents' Attitudes, 4) Career and Educational Plans, 5) Level of Commitment to Partner, 6) Desire to Have Children, 7) Moral Considerations, 8) Social Factors. I developed these research questions: 1) What do undergraduate men and women see as their alternatives in resolving an unplanned pregnancy and which alternatives would they choose? 2) How do undergraduates rate the eight considerations in importance to decision making? 3) To what extent do choices and ratings of considerations differ by sex and change as a result of discussion with partner? 4) To what extent do partners agree on choices?

Forty-five unmarried couples who were undergraduates at the University of Delaware were participants. They were all volunteers, were not paid for their participation, and were recruited through classes, resident advisors and adver-

tisements. I told students I was studying couples' decision making and asked for participants who had been dating at least a few months and could come with their partner for a one hour interview. All forty-five couples who volunteered for the study were included. They did not differ significantly in race, year in school, length of relationship, whether they were sexually active and whether they had discussed the pregnancy issue with their partner before the interview. The typical student who volunteered was a white junior, had been dating his/her partner for about 1½ years, was sexually active and had discussed the pregnancy dilemma.

All forty five couples were given the Hypothetical Pregnacy Dilemma, designed for this study. The student was asked to imagine discovering the woman was pregnant, to list all alternatives she/he would consider, to choose the most desirable and explain why and finally to list the considerations that influenced the decision. On the next page each of the eight considerations was listed with a rating scale from one to seven; students were asked to rate each on its importance to decision making. Students filled out these questionnaires without consulting their partner. Each of the twenty-five couples whom I designated as the experimental group met in a room by themselves and discussed the pregnancy dilemma, trying to reach a mutually agreeable solution. The twenty control group couples met individually and discussed where they would like to go on a vacation. Both groups taped their conversations. Then all forty-five couples filled out the Hypothetical Pregnancy Dilemma.

DATA ANALYSIS

Chi-square anslyses were used to compare frequency distributions for the four alternatives listed as possible courses of action. For the "Alternatives Considered" variable, a chi-square was performed on each alternative separately since students could list more than one alternative. Experimental and control,

men and women, and pre and posttest responses were compared. On the "Alternative Chosen" variable, overall chi-square analyses were performed. Men and women's responses were compared as well as experimental and control and pre and posttest responses. To analyze partner agreement on the "Alternative Chosen" variable, couples were placed in one of three groups: (a) Agree Pre and Post, if both the man and woman chose the same alternative on both questionnaires; (b) Disagree Pre, Agree Post if they chose different alternatives at pretest but changed to agree at posttest; (c) Disagree Post if they either agreed at pretest but changed to disagree at posttest or if they disagreed on both questionnaires. An overall chi-square analysis was performed on this matrix.

Two separate analyses were performed on the "Rating of Considerations" variable. Analyses of covariance were used to control for differences at pretest between experimental and control groups. Wilks Lambda was calculated to reveal any significant differences between pre and posttest mean ratings. Responses of men and women were analyzed separately. Means and standard deviations were calculated and *t* tests performed to analyze differences in ratings between men and women.

RESULTS

To the question "What do you see as your alternatives?" about 70% listed abortion. Over 60% of the students listed marriage as an alternative. Adoption was seen as an alternative by about 50% and about 50% listed single parenthood as an alternative. There were no significant sex differences or differences from pre to posttest. These results are shown in Table 1.

The second question was "Which alternative would you choose?" Abortion was most commonly chosen, selected by about 40% of the students. Marriage was chosen by about 35%, single parenthood was chosen by about 10% and adoption was chosen by about 7%. There were no significant sex differences or differences from pre

to posttest. These results are shown in Table 2. I compared partners' choices of alternatives to measure degree of consensus between members of the same couple. Fifty-one (51) percent of the couples agreed both at pre and post test. Of those who disagreed at pre test, 9 of 12 couples in the experimental group and 1 of 10 in the control group agreed at post test. These results are shown in Table 3.

When asked to rate the eight considerations, "Level of Commitment to Partner" and "What My Partner Wants to Do" were close to "extremely important". "Desire to Have Children", "Financial Considerations", and "Career and Educational Plans" were rated "Of great importance". "Parents' Attitudes", "Moral Considerations" and "Social Factors" were rated as fairly unimportant to the decision making. When men and women's ratings were compared, only ratings of "What my Partner Wants to Do" showed a significant difference. The men in the experimental group rated this consideration lower than did experimental group women. These results are shown in Table 4.

To summarize my results: Student responses to the pregnancy dilemma were similar for both men and women, experimental and control groups, pre and post test. Abortion and marriage were most commonly listed as possible alternatives if faced with an unplanned pregnancy. In rating considerations, "Level of Commitment to Partner" and "What My Partner Wants To Do" were most important to the decision making process. Discussion of the pregnancy dilemma with partner had little affect on the students who agreed on choices. Among the group of experimental couples who disagreed at the pre test, discussion with partner led to greater agreement at post test.

DISCUSSION

The most striking finding was the similarity among these men and women in their choice for pregnancy resolution and in their ratings of considerations. This indicates that, at least among this group of college students, there was considerable agreement as to what actions would be acceptable to resolve an un-

planned pregnancy, which alternative would be chosen, and which considerations would be weighed most heavily when making the decision. Related to this conclusion was the finding that a majority of couples agreed at pre test on the alternative they would choose to resolve the pregnancy dilemma. Of those who did not agree, if given the opportunity to discuss the dilemma with their partners, most were able to reach an agreement. It was usually the man who changed his choice to match that of his partner.

It is important to consider the nature of this sample in interpreting any results. These students have two characteristics that affect the results; they were all volunteers and they all participated with their partners. Social psychologists have examined the biases that are inherent in research studies using volunteers. There is the suggestion that couples who volunteer for research are committed to the relationship to a greater degree than couples who would not volunteer. (Locke, 1954; Kaats & Davis, 1972) Rosenthal and Rosnow (1975) found that women were more likely to participate in research than men. While gathering participants for this study I noticed that in all but three cases it was the female member of the couple who made the initial contact with me. Each of those women had to persuade her partner to participate; that the women called me indicates that they had a slightly higher degree of interest than the men. Hill, Rubin, Peplau and Willard (1979) interpret women's willingness to participate in light of sex role expectations; women are concerned with social and emotional issues and therefore exhibit more interest in research which requires self analysis and self disclosure. In their experience recruiting couples, women showed more interest than men. They concluded that men who do agree to participate may be less traditional in sex role orientation than their peers.

That couples who participate in research are more committed to one another and that the male partners are less traditional in sex role orientation could begin to explain why participants would answer similarly. Most of the couples in this study had already discussed the pregnancy dilemma and may have agreed on a preferred course of action should the woman ever become pregnant. The non-traditional sex role orientation of the men could diminish sex differences that might be predicted.

Another variable that has an impact on responses is the length of relationship. The couples in this sample had been dating for an average of one and a half years. Hill, Rubin and Peplau (1976) compared the couples in their sample of 231 undergraduate pairs whose relationships endured with those who broke up. The students who were involved in lasting relationships were more similar to their partners in values and interests than were the couples whose relationships ended. Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) in their study of mate selection concur that the closest couples in their survey were those who agreed on family values. Since the couples in this study had been dating for a relatively long period it is not surprising that their answers on the pregnancy dilemma, which involved values, would be similar.

The ratings of considerations may have been affected by these couples commitment to one another. Partners' feelings and the preservation of the relationship were two factors of great importance to these couples. To students in less committed relationships, these factors might have been superseded by individual concerns.

It was obvious that the men in this sample felt tremendous responsibility as participants in the unplanned pregnancy and took a supportive role towards their partner. Among the nine couples who disagreed at pretest and were able to discuss the dilemma with their partners, it was the men in eight out of nine cases who changed their choice to match their partner. The men spoke of the pregnancy's

effect on the woman's body and this physical prescence seemed to represent to them the greater impact that the pregnancy would have on their partners than on themselves. In future research, it would be important to explore in more depth men's feelings about this supportive role and whether they would be truly satisfied with a decision that might go against what they would have chosen for themselves.

Another striking finding was the relative unimportance of moral considerations in the decision making. In the pilot study, students considered moral as well as other considerations yet in the final study, students ranked "moral considerations" as one of the least important variables they considered when making their decision. Rather it was personal and relationship factors that were most salient. Were students denying the importance of the moral issues that unplanned pregnancy arouses or does the finding provide evidence of the growing acceptance of abortion? What exactly are the implications of this valuing of personal over moral concerns? After listening to the tapes and reading anecdotal responses of the students I concluded that their decision making, rather than being unaffected by moral considerations involved a broader definition of morality then my questionnaire allowed. Because of their acceptance of abortion as a possible alternative, the students were not as concerned with the classic moral dilemma, that of the viability of the fetus, but were concerned about the effect of the pregnancy on their own lives. Because this was a hypothetical dilemma, they were able to ignore the emotional issues of destroying the fetus and focus instead on an ideal solution. However, the responses suggest that the language used in the questionnaire may have misled them because the content of their responses <u>does</u> reflect a weighing of moral principles. They grappled with the moral issue of whether to bring a child into an environment where the parents may not totally welcome a birth. One student said, "One has an obligation to the person you bring into the world. To ask yourself, can you provide them with a happy, stable environment." Another student said, "Perhaps my opinion is a

bit biased because I do not feel the need to have children. If asked whether or not I plan to have children, most likely I would answer no. This may be a selfish view but I prefer to further my own life without dragging a child into it. That wouldn't be fair when I don't really want one." Another moral dilemma involves the effect on the family of having a child without being married. One student said that she would choose abortion because although she was always opposed to it, she saw the impact that a 16 year old cousin's pregnancy had on the family. She realized how hurt, how upset and how rejecting the parents were of that cousin and felt that she couldn't give up the emotional as well as the material support of her family. She felt she would lose that support if they knew she was pregnant. Another student said that she would choose single parenthood. She opposed abortion, felt that her parents and friends would support her in being a single parent, and was convinced she could be a good parent. What these quotes suggest is that moral reasoning may be situation specific. What an individual may advocate in one situation changes as external circumstances change. A student who believes that aborting a fetus is wrong may find that, when faced with carrying a child for nine months, giving it up for adoption, disrupting career plans and coping with family disapproval, abortion becomes the lesser of the evils. This phenomenon was noted by Freeman (1978) in a study of attitudes of women seeking abortion. She found that few of the women viewed themselves as abortion advocates before the pregnancy, but their crisis required a shift in values and they came to view abortion as a necessity. For a student who absolutely opposes abortion, the disapproval of others is not as upsetting as violating a strongly held belief. Such a student is apt to view parenthood in a positive light.

The students' responses suggest that couples were grappling with moral questions and that the men and women used similar constracts in making their

decisions. The choice "moral considerations" as listed on the questionnaire was not defined so it is difficult to know how they interpreted this choice. The term "morality" may connote a simplistic judgement about the appropriateness of sexual behavior or the conservative values of parents or religious institutions rather than a reasoned analysis of personal or spiritual principles that govern ethical conduct. For the students in this study, practical and moral considerations were interwoven.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In spite of research documenting sex differences in socialization (Hodgson and Fisher, 1979) and moral reasoning (Jacobs, 1975; Gilligan, 1977) sex differences were not shown in this study of couples' decision-making about unplanned pregnancy. The students examined a number of moral, personal and practical issues in making a decision. This study points out the need for future research on the male role in pregnancy resolution. It is seen through this study that men took a supportive role. It would be interesting to follow up and see how durable this support might be. It would be useful to investigate men's reaction to this role and compare it to their role in other relationship decisions since this is one decision in the life of a couple where the woman has the ultimate power. The women in this study demonstrated the ability to assess their own needs and decide on a course of action and the similarity of partner's responses suggests that the couples successfully evolved a mutually agreeable decision. In the case of an actual pregnancy, would resolution be so easily achieved? Unmarried pregnant college students do not always have the luxury of cooperative partners and a decision free from guilty and anxiety. Research is needed which examines the impact of actual unplanned pregnancy on men and women in order to make solid conclusions about the nature of this dilemma and the

influences on decision-making. A much larger sample is needed which represents a variety of religious, ethnic and class groups as well as students involved in committed and casual relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

This study offers evidence about the considerations that may be critical to student's decision-making. It offers a warning to counselors to be careful about emphasizing the moral responsibility to the fetus. It is important to elicit from the students themselves, their own moral and practical considerations and to be sensitive to the individuals unique perspective on the pregnancy issue. It may also be helpful to give the male partner an opportunity to speak to a counselor alone. The man's need to be supportive to the woman may inhibit an honest examination of his own feelings about the pregnancy. Many of the couples who participated in this study remarked that the decision-making process raised important questions which they discussed later. Simulated decision-making may be a useful tool for counseling and residence staff. The technique may encourage students to face the consequences of their sexual activity and may promote responsible use of birth control.

TABLE 1

"WHAT DO YOU SEE AS YOUR ALTERNATIVES?"

	Experimental n=50								
	Males				Females				
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	X^2
Abortion	24	96%	22	88%	24	96%	22	88%	.32
Marriage	18	72%	16	64%	16	64%	14	56%	.69
Adoption	14	56%	16	64%	17	68%	14	56%	.05
Single Parenthood	11	44%	9	36%	13	52%	10	40%	1.01

	Control n=40								
	Males				Females				
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	X^2
Abortion	14	70%	14	70%	11	55%	10	50%	.02
Marriage	16	80%	15	75%	16	80%	16	80%	.07
Adoption	10	50%	10	50%	9	45%	8	40%	.05
Single Parenthood	12	60%	11	35%	13	65%	9	45%	1.26

Note. Row total percentages are greater than 100% because students were asked to list as many alternatives as they considered; many listed more than one.

TABLE 2

"WHICH ALTERNATIVE WOULD YOU CHOOSE?"

Experimental
n=50

	Males				Females				
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	X^2
Abortion	12	48%	11	44%	14	56%	13	52%	
Marriage	10	40%	9	36%	7	28%	9	36%	3.27
Adoption	1	4%	3	12%	2	8%	2	8%	
Single Parenthood	2	8%	2	8%	2	8%	1	4%	

Control
n=40

	Males				Females				
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	X^2
Adoption	8	40%	7	35%	7	35%	7	35%	
Marriage	7	35%	7	35%	7	35%	8	40%	.84
Adoption	3	15%	3	15%	1	5%	1	5%	
Single Parenthood	3	15%	3	15%	5	25%	4	20%	

Note. *On this question students were asked to choose one of the possible alternatives listed on the previous question.*

TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES CHOSEN
BY MEMBERS OF SAME COUPLE

	Agree Pre / Agree Post		Disagree Pre / Agree Post		Disagree Pre / Disagree Post		Total		X^2
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
Experimental	13	29%	9	20%	3	6%	25		18.76^{xx}
Control	10	22%	1	2%	9	20%	20		
Total	23	51%	10	22%	12	26%	45	99%	

xx p .005

Note. Percentage totals have been rounded off and so do not add up to 100%.

TABLE 4
MEAN RATINGS OF CONSIDERATIONS AT PRETEST BY SEX AND GROUP

	Experimental (N=50)					Control (N=40)				
	Males		Females			Males		Females		
	M	SD	M	SD	t	M	SD	M	SD	t
Level of Commitment to Partner	1.40	.70	1.36	.56	1.22	1.45	.60	1.60	1.39	1.22
What My Partner Wants to Do	2.24	1.39	2.24	1.39	2.26[x]	1.65	.93	1.25	.55	1.65
Desire to Have Children	2.12	1.53	2.72	1.45	-1.42	3.30	2.13	2.85	1.92	.70
Career/Educational Plans	2.32	1.65	2.44	.96	- .31	2.20	.83	2.35	1.26	- .44
Financial Considerations	3.00	2.00	2.76	1.36	.50	2.85	1.49	2.60	1.60	.51
Parets' Attitudes	3.36	2.05	3.60	1.70	- .46	3.55	2.11	3.60	1.53	- .09
Moral Considerations	3.36	2.03	3.90	1.70	- .83	2.80	2.33	3.15	2.08	- .50
Social Factors	5.20	1.47	5.56	1.47	- .46	3.55	2.11	3.60	1.53	- .09

x p .05

Note. Mean ratings represent scores on Likert Scale with 1-Extremely Important, 2=Of Great Importance, 3=Fairly Important, 4=Of Some Importance, 5=Fairly Unimportant, 6=Of Very Little Importance, 7=Not Important.

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